

WEATHERING: AN ALTERNATIVE WAY OF UNDERSTANDING INDUSTRIAL IMPACT ON ENVIRONMENT AND HUMANS IN YEKATERINBURG

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Abstract

At present, there are two common ways to understand the impact of industries on the environment. One of them is to abstract statistics from the real industrial pollution scene and base the understanding and decision making on those statistics. The other is to regard the images of industrial landscape as a certain type of aesthetics. Neither of these two perspectives can give us a real insight of what is actually happening around Yekaterinburg, one of the cities in the world most polluted by heavy industry, what the causes are and how they have reshaped the local life. Instead, we need a 'transcorporeal' perspective - a term developed by Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen Walker. Being transcorporeal, in her essay, means to go beyond the bifurcations of nature-culture or human-weather opposition, and instead to feel the process of 'weathering' where human body interacts intimately with the change of temperature, humidity, sunlight resonating in our skin, veins and nerves, for a better understanding and reaction to climate change.¹ This essay applies and adapts Neimanis' inspiring theory of transcorporeality to the realm of industrial impacts, because climate change and industrial impacts are similar to each other, in the sense that they can both be seen as the disturbance or damage to the natural environment, where human activity has played the main role combined with the feedbacks from the ecosystem, and in return has influenced the living conditions of people. With this 'transcorporeal' perspective, we might truly internalize the industrial impact on the environment, and even help us be critical about our moves towards the industrial impacts.

An Alternative Understanding of Industrial Landscape in Yekaterinburg

The impact of industries on the environment always generates uncomfortable feelings, if one simply thinks of the scars on the ground such as pollution, pit lakes, man-made deserts, underground cavities as the result of mining (all referred to as 'industrial impact' or 'industrial landscape' in the following texts). However, certain aesthetics can be derived from such landscape. Blindingly beautiful images of the industrial landscape around Yekaterinburg, one of the most polluted Russian cities due to its heavy industries, are easily accessible on the internet: colourful polluted lakes with industrial plants standing in the background, or abandoned open pit mines appearing like mysterious ancient heritages. Such intriguing images can also be associated with a certain

¹ Neimanis, Astrida, and Rachel Loewen Walker. 2014. "Weathering: Climate Change and the "Thick Time" of Transcorporeality". *Hypatia*. 29 (3): 558-575, p560.

type of humid, entropic, post-apocalyptic aesthetics, similar to what made Andrei Tarkovsky's famous movie *Stalker* so fascinating.



Fig 1, a typical industrial landscape around Yekaterinburg.



Fig 2, a frame from *Stalker*.

This certain wasteland aesthetics are one kind of popular way to conceptualize the industrial impacts. Another way of understanding, which might be more influential than cultural aesthetics, is statistical data or mappings, based upon which people can easily build their impression of how severe a place is polluted, and certain policies in attempts to control or relive industrial impacts are made. For example, according to a 2003 research on caving craters and sinkholes as a result of underground mining in Berezovsky, a satellite city of Yekaterinburg, there is a total of about 600 thousand cubic meters of void holes underground,² exposing the

² “Старые Провалы и Воронки в Земле Угрожают Безопасности Жителей Березовского (Old Dips and Funnels in the Earth Threaten the Safety of Berezovsky Residents),” VIPERSON, April 16, 2003, <http://viperson.ru/wind.php?ID=561410>.

residents to huge threat of sinking. By contrast, the funds from the Sverdlovsk region government are far from enough to erase such danger, regardless of the requirements from local Union of Gold Workers.³

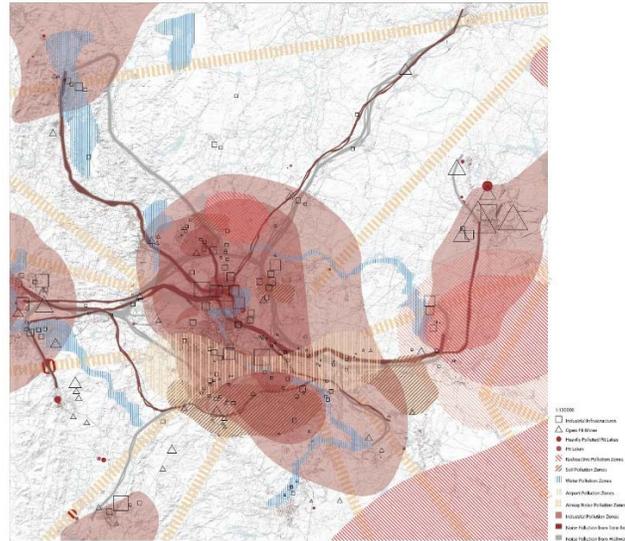


Fig 3. Mapping of the pollutions around Yekaterinburg.

However, neither abstract statistics nor image-based aesthetics can give us a real insight of what is actually happening around Yekaterinburg, what the causes are and how they have reshaped the local life. We need a ‘transcorporeal’ perspective - a term developed by Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen Walker. Being transcorporeal, in her essay, means to go beyond the bifurcations of nature-culture or human-weather opposition, and instead to feel the process of ‘weathering’ where human body interacts intimately with the change of temperature, humidity, sunlight resonating in our skin, veins and nerves, for a better understanding and reaction to climate change.⁴ This essay applies and adapts Neimanis’ inspiring theory of transcorporeality to the realm of industrial impacts, because climate change and industrial impacts are similar to each other, in the sense that they can both be seen as the disturbance or damage to the natural environment, where human activity has played the main role combined with the feedbacks from the ecosystem, and in return has influenced the living conditions of people.

To clarify why we need an alternative transcorporeal understanding, the abstract, data-based monolithic perspective derives from neoliberal methods of controlling the decay of the environment by “mitigation, sustainability, cap and trade, renewable resources,”⁵ which treat the globe simply as a milieu or a background for human survival, possible to be manipulated, transformed, controlled and made use of by humans. Such way of looking at the environment decay somehow extracts the subject of human body from the ecosystem it

³ For details of the numbers of the funds, see Ksenia Dubicheva, “Эксперт: Жителям Березовского Не Стоит Бояться Провалов Почвы (Expert: Residents of Berезovsky Should Not Be Afraid of Soil Failures),” *Российская газета* (Российская газета, October 14, 2011), <https://rg.ru/2011/10/14/reg-urfo/budget.html>.

⁴ Neimanis, Astrida, and Rachel Loewen Walker. 2014. “Weathering: Climate Change and the “Thick Time” of Transcorporeality”. *Ныпатиа*. 29 (3): 558-575, p560.

⁵ Ibid, p567.

dwells in, in the meantime also triggering “a particular mode of relating to the earth, as though human beings are somehow separate from the natural elements”.⁶

In Russia, nevertheless, even such top-down mode of dealing with environmental problems can be dampened by institutional inertia in the economic and political systems, where a heritage from the Communist system, the centrally planned economy, is still very much influential, also inasmuch as that political motives has been leading the post-USSR era privatization,⁷ resulting in huge obstacle in making and executing environmental policies. In this heavily historically involved Russian context, the treatment of environmental problems including industrial pollution, is more a political game. In reality, Urals has a long history of loosening its subsidiary role to the Russian sovereignty, from eighteenth century ever since when it feed the whole country with its rich resources and industrial products, while maintaining some autonomy as ‘a state within a state’.⁸ Not long after the dissolution of the USSR, the never officially recognized Ural Republic started by Eduard Rossel, the governor of the Sverdlovsk oblast then, existed from July 1 to November 9, 1993, with Yekaterinburg as its capital. The real pursuit behind the campaign was to gain priority over other Russian administrative regions, instead of real independence. Nevertheless, it still shows a certain degree of the urge for autonomy. The Ural Republic was finally terminated by Yeltsin, the first president of Russian Federation, who was born in Yekaterinburg himself.

There is no way that local political leaders, as well as citizens, can be without dissatisfaction to the domination from Moscow, also given its historic role as Russia’s industrial heart, pumping the products all over the country, or even the world, leaving the pollution to itself. In an interview, Andrei Gavrilovsky, a successful local furniture businessman stated “the Moscow business comes here just to grab. If it doesn't work for nothing, they leave it. They don't care about the region, they spit, get out, work out until Friday and fly to Moscow for the weekend”.⁹ Therefore, it is necessary to move from the politicians’ offices to the open fields around Yekaterinburg, where not only the factories and mines have already made their impact on the natural environment, but also have been used by locals as ‘playgrounds’.

Industrial Landscape as Playground

Toxic and destructive as it is in its nature, the industrial landscape around Yekaterinburg seems to be happily accepted by locals as good tourist spots. The aforementioned aesthetics generated in those places have made them very popular for a vacation or simply as a location for eye-catching photographs to be posted on social media. On condition that the contamination has already spread to almost all the water systems in Yekaterinburg, some locals even swim in them, regardless of the risk of sickness. In fact, according to a local

⁶ Ibid, p567-568.

⁷ Söderholm, Patrik. “Environmental Policy in Transition Economies: Will Pollution Charges Work?” *The Journal of Environment & Development* 10, no. 4 (December 2001): 365–90, p376.

⁸ Dmitry Sarutov, “История Уральской Республики (History of the Ural Republic),” *После Империи (After Empire)*, December 19, 2016, <http://afterempire.info/2016/12/19/ural/>.

⁹ Olesya Gerasimenko подписка подписка, “Местных Ставить Нельзя - Они Договорятся и Устроят Республику,” (“You can't put the locals - they will agree and arrange a republic”) – *Власть – Коммерсантъ (Журнал "Коммерсантъ Власть" №26 от 02.07.2012, стр. 11, July 1, 2012)*, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1966881>.

study of the water bodies, none of the local reservoirs are clean enough for people to swim,¹⁰ so it is no wonder that the health conditions of local residents can be at risk.

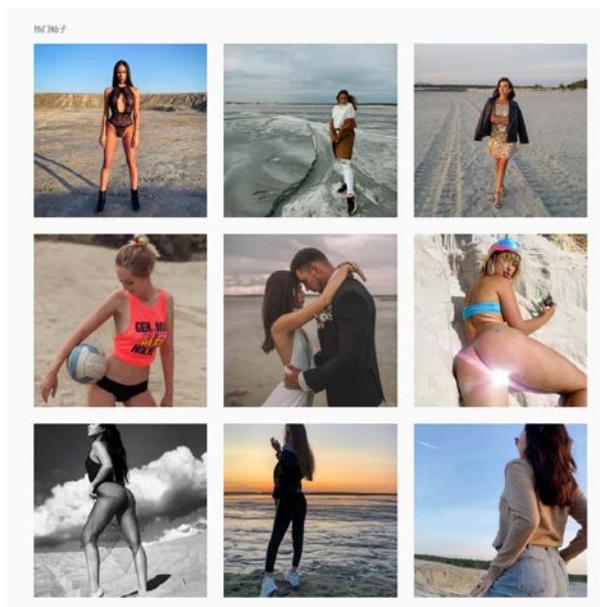


Fig 4, the search results of ‘Березовские Пески (Berezovsky Sands, a gold mine tailing deposit in Berezovsky)’ on Instagram.

In other words, the locals subjected themselves to the effects of industrial pollution on their own wills. During their close contact with the industrial landscape, the process of weathering already began. The active users of the industrial landscape are the first receivers of the transcorporeality of weathering. Similar to Astrida’s description of the weathering process between human and the weather :“Rain might extend into our arthritic joints, sun might literally color our skin, and the chill of the wind might echo through the hidden hallways of our eardrums”¹¹, the industrial pollution has already weathered the locals. Their skin can get red and itchy, their respiratory system slowly decaying due to the long exposure to air pollution, and also the toxicity already infiltrated into the waterbody from which they get their drinking water. To this extent, the pollution has already become more than a simple backdrop for the locals, but a sandbox in which they live their everyday life, a kind of liquid already absorbed by and transforming their body. The way they sense the toxic effects of industries is hugely different from the policy makers or the administrators of the mining companies. Through their transcorporeal experience the question here shifts from “what should we do to repair industrial impacts?” to “how are industrial impacts affecting us”.¹²

¹⁰ “‘Обезвоживание’. На Среднем Урале Нет Водоёмов Для Купания (“Dehydration”. There are no swimming reservoirs in the Middle Urals)” Рамблер/доктор, July 4, 2018, <https://doctor.rambler.ru/news/40248853-obezvozhivanie-na-srednem-urale-net-vodemoov-dlya-kupaniya/?updated>.

¹¹ Neimanis, Astrida, and Rachel Loewen Walker. 2014. “Weathering : Climate Change and the “Thick Time” of Transcorporeality”. *Нурпаиа*. 29 (3): 558-575, p560.

¹² An adaptation of Astrida and Rachel’s text, originally: “This project shifts away from the dominant temporality of climate change discourse, where progress and sustainability narratives meld in the anticipatory mode of ‘what should we do to stop climate change?’ and instead asks ‘how is climate change me?’.”

However, what is not sufficiently discussed in Astrida and Rachel's essay is what comes after we have understood the transcorporeality of weathering, and how we can respond to it through our praxis. What she mentioned as "a weather pattern, a heat-absorbent ocean, the pleasure of a late-fall swim, and the turn of a key in the ignition as the interconnected temporalities we call 'climate change'," is more a kind of intuitive response to weather change, although with the necessity of being responsible to direct this responsivity more consciously.¹³ Therefore, we might start questioning what phenomena following this weathering have this critical nature. Here a criterion is proposed that, if the weathering process is followed by a critical behavior by the weathered human body, either as a conceptual response to what is happening, or as an attempt to internalize the scene (later referred to as subsequent phenomena), then this form of weathering, together with its subsequent phenomena, are critical.

If we first take a look at the popularity of Instagram photography in the industrial landscape, we can hardly say that they are critical. Even though they can be regarded as the end or the sum up of a transcorporeal weathering process, on condition that the travelers themselves are experiencing the industrial landscape themselves while assimilating and being assimilated by the environment, their action of taking pictures is simply a quotation of the reality, without any process of abstraction or conceptualization.¹⁴ Moreover, some local blogs have listed a number of industrial landscapes as photography spots, advocating an image-consumption-based tourism. Such phenomena have the tendency towards what Fredric Jameson described as two major postmodern symptoms: the disappearance of history because reality is transformed into images, disabling contemporary society of remembering its past, and time fragmented into a series of perpetual presents.¹⁵ This answers the previous question why the aesthetic-based understanding of industrial impacts doesn't provide a transcorporeal view either. In order not to fall into this postmodern ideology and the trap of consumer-capitalism, the awareness of criticism in the weathering process is needed. There is a slightly more critical form of photography in Berezovsky. Yekaterinburg photographer Alexander Yozh Osipov has held several photography workshops in Berezovsky Sands, featuring post-apocalyptic themes which fit in well with the appearance of the environment. These photographs somehow seize the genius loci of Berezovsky Sands, while still not critical enough. From the various themes of his photographs, we might say that Alexander's works are not deeply analytical of the environment, because even the photographer himself didn't say much about the site connection. Instead, his organization of a photographic session always began with a predetermined theme.¹⁶

¹³Neimanis, Astrida, and Rachel Loewen Walker. 2014. "Weathering : Climate Change and the "Thick Time" of Transcorporeality". *Hypatia*. 29 (3): 558-575, p573.

¹⁴ For the relationship between photography and nature, see Berger, John, and Geoff Dyer. 2013. *Understanding a photograph*. London: Penguin Books.

¹⁵ Foster, Hal, Habermas, Jürgen, Frampton, Kenneth, Krauss, Rosalind, Crimp, Douglas, Owens, Craig, Ulmer, Gregory L., Jameson, Fredric, Baudrillard, Jean, and Said, Edward W. 1983. *The Anti-Aesthetic : Essays on Postmodern Culture*. Bay Press, p125.

¹⁶ Yulia Zabaylovich, "Екатеринбургский Фотограф Создал в Березовских Песках Мир с Чудовищами и Тремя Иисусами (Yekaterinburg photographer created a world with monsters and three Jesus in Berezovsky Sands)," *Новости Екатеринбурга*, September 28, 2020, https://www.e1.ru/news/spool/news_id-69482977.html.



Fig 5, Alexander Yozh Osipov's post-apocalyptic photography in Berezovsky Sands.

A British Inspiration - Derek Jarman's Garden at Dungeness

In Dungeness, a headland on the coast of Kent, about 100 kilometers southeast of London, British artist Derek Jarman provides us with what could be understood as a critical subsequent phenomenon of weathering. Having been diagnosed with AIDS in December 1986, Jarman moved from London to Prospect Cottage, a previous fisherman's hut in Dungeness, where he built a small garden on the shingle beach under the shadow of a nuclear plant. Jarman's garden is deeply involved with his personal history of resistance against Thatcherism, which was the dominant political ideology in England around 1980s, with hostility against minor groups including himself being homosexual. Jarman sensed a nationalist monumentality in Thatcherism, where history was reshaped as a linear succession of causes and effects.¹⁷ Such linear spatialization is also opposed in Astrida's essay, where she summed up the neo-liberal reliance on 'a linear earth time where past, present, and future make up a time-line of human progression, a chronos of self-actualization.'¹⁸

Jarman's argument against the monumental nationalist history might have originated from his several experiences in Villa Borghese, which was originally a place to house the owner Cardinal Scipione Borghese's large collection of classical art works, featuring several gay artists including Bernini and Caravaggio.¹⁹ Scipione Borghese himself was also suspected to be homosexual. The garden of Villa Borghese was referred to as 'the shadow of Eden' by Jarman, where he once made love with his lover.²⁰ However, with some later additions to Villa Borghese, the originally intimate homosexual space was transformed into a space of nationalist monumentality. The addition included a circle of marble statues of Italian historical figures, a water clock and an Egyptian twin Pylon gateway, both obliquely reflecting the imperial fantasy of Italy at that time, which

¹⁷ O'Quinn, D. 1999. "Gardening, History, and the Escape from Time: Derek Jarman's Modern Nature". *OCTOBER -CAMBRIDGE MASSACHUSETTS*-. (89): 113-126.

¹⁸ Neimanis, Astrida, and Rachel Loewen Walker. 2014. "Weathering : Climate Change and the "Thick Time" of Transcorporeality". *Hypatia*. 29 (3): 558-575, p567.

¹⁹ Livia Hengel, "A Brief History Of The Galleria Borghese," Culture Trip (The Culture Trip, August 20, 2016), <https://theculturetrip.com/europe/italy/articles/a-brief-history-of-the-galleria-borghese/>.

²⁰ Jarman, Derek. 2009. *Modern Nature*. University of Minnesota Press, p14.

Jarman himself must have felt had similarities to Thatcherism.²¹ It could be that Jarman was considering the same threat to an initially innocent, intimate queer space that he felt in the history of Villa Borghese when he started to craft his own garden as a homosexual sanctuary, warning himself not to let his garden become the second fallen Villa Borghese.



Fig 6, View from Derek Jarman's garden, the nuclear plant can be seen in the distance.

Prospect Cottage, the place he chose as his site was under the shadow of a local nuclear plant, which could be a metaphor of the hostile nationalist context in Britain at the time. Here, all the vertical elements hand-crafted by Jarman are all made from the materials he collected from the beach - drift woods, scrap metals and something he dismantled from existing derelict military structure remaining from World War II. The first level of weathering is here: Jarman countered the enduring monumentality in the immortal marble statues with the mortality given to his statues by the mortal materials he chose. Moreover, the whole garden itself and how it was made can be regarded as emerging from Jarman's transcorporeal understanding of the weathering processes within Dungeness' harsh environment, and also his struggle with HIV, which kept weathering his body from inside. In his journals, he had many picturesque descriptions of him and his cottage being 'weathered':

The first dull waves of panic washed over me. I dressed fumbling in the dark. Feeling cold and nauseous I groped my way by the spectral beam of the lighthouse towards the kitchen at the

²¹ O'Quinn, D. 1999. "Gardening, History, and the Escape from Time: Derek Jarman's Modern Nature". *OCTOBER -CAMBRIDGE MASSACHUSETTS*. (89): 113-126, p120-121.

back of the house, which was taking the full brunt of a storm increasing its intensity by the minute. I found a candle and lit it; if anything, its guttering flame increased my feelings of insecurity and isolation.

Outside, the nuclear power station glowed in the dark. I blew out the candle. A fisherman's hut disintegrating seemed in the dark to be the house itself; every timber was stretched to breaking point. Now and again a board split from its neighbour, 80 years of tar and paint parting like a rifle shot. The house was breaking up. I sat and waited for the roof to blow away or a window to cave in.²²

Through his struggle with the harsh shingle beach environment, Jarman slowly built up his small Eden. From an architectural perspective, some spatial characteristics of his garden constitutes his resistance against the decisive linear time of the historical monumentality of Thatcherism. First of all, his garden has no boundary, or simply the horizon is his boundary, so it is impossible to tell where his garden starts and ends. A visitor approaches his garden from the east side, following the road from the town to Dungeness, and ends up in front of the garden. The civilization world approaches the garden from the road, welcomed by the more rational, geometric shapes Jarman set up at his front door. As the visitor moves to the west side of the garden, the geometric forms slowly disappear, replaced by the carefully arranged 'wilderness', followed by the real wilder nature, with the nuclear plant in the distance. Through this transition, no clear differentiation can be sensed - only temporality remains.

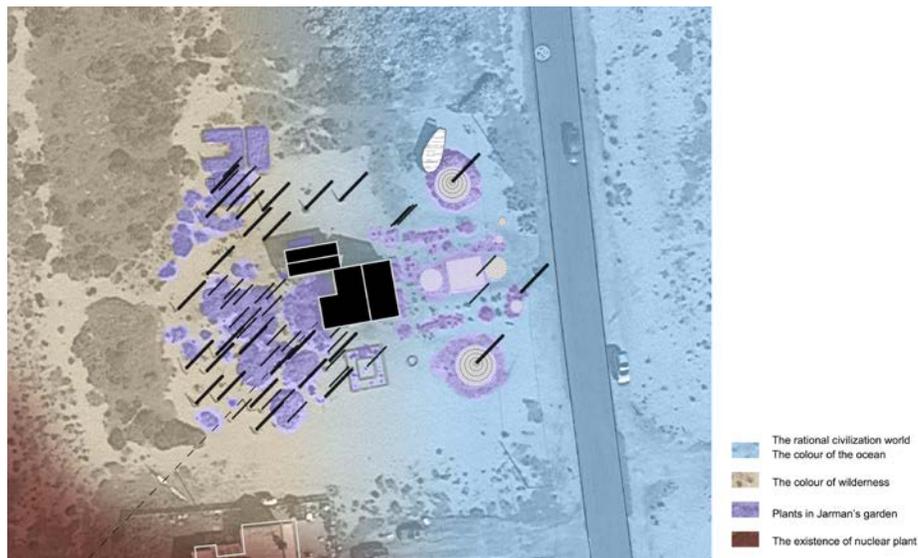


Fig 7, Mapping of Jarman's Garden

Wild as it might seem, the garden is very much a genius creation of Jarman through much hardship, infused with his vernacular considerations. He carried out massive research and experiments of what kind of plants would grow in the infertile shingle. To let the plants survive, he buried soil and fertilizers underneath the shingle, without making them too obvious as flower beds. Moreover, he and his partner Keith Collins who took care of Jarman's garden after his death were widely supported by the local community at Dungeness,

²² Jarman, Derek. 2009. *Modern Nature*. University of Minnesota Press, p19.

consisting an important spiritual part of the garden.²³ The style of Jarman's cottage: black tarred wood planks, came from the traditional fisherman's hut, which Jarman originally decorated with yellow frames of windows and doors. Such architectural style has been welcomed by house owners and designers who built their house later in the neighbourhood.

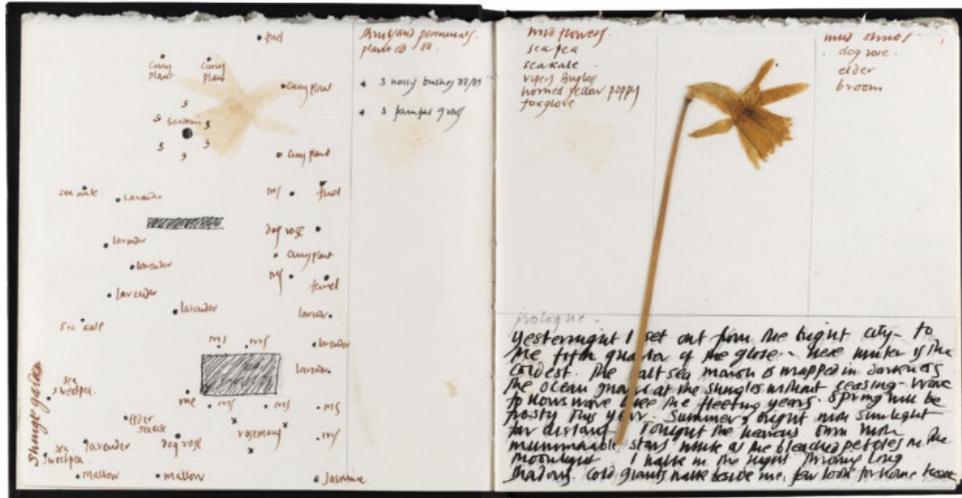


Fig 8, Jarman's plan of plants.



Fig 9, view from west side of Jarman's garden.

At this point, it is probably safe to conclude that the creation of Jarman's garden is a series of critical subsequent phenomena of his 'weathering' with the environment: the omnipresent influence from the nuclear plant, the careful choice of plants, the relationship with the community. Everything is vernacular, reflective of what is happening within the environment, the garden, and Jarman himself - the transcorporeal system, with Jarman, his partner and the local community 'no longer outside observers, able to examine, log data, and

²³ From the narrative of Johnny Bruce, "Johnny Bruce: Gardening at Prospect Cottage", October 2020, video, <https://vimeo.com/453705083>.

calculate a future, but right in the thick of things.’²⁴ From another point of view, his garden is his own resistance against the historic time of Thatcherism, as well as his conceptualization of the societal atmosphere, both of which he realized through making his garden an aggregation of suspended temporalities. The garden is also the outcome of his transcorporeal weathering in relation to the hostile physical and societal environment.

Conclusion

The process of weathering is happening in Yekaterinburg, where local people expose themselves to the toxic impacts of industrial production, entertaining themselves with and simultaneously being gradually damaged by them. We have already gone beyond two existing comparatively superficial ways of conceptualizing the industrial landscape in Yekaterinburg: the top-down data based political one and the post-modern image-based aesthetics, looking for what can be seen as a critical form of transcorporeal weathering. The first criterion is that, if the subject of weathering attempts to conceptualize or internalize the scene they are in, then the weathering process they are going through is critical.

We can find this kind of critical weathering in Derek Jarman’s garden, which bears much similarity to Yekaterinburg in terms of its harsh environment, and the omnipresence of industrial impacts (in Dungeness the existence of the nuclear plant). Together with the multiple layers of weathering in his garden, it is an ideal model for us to further the question ‘how the industrial impacts in Yekaterinburg are shaping its people’, with the aim of a critical conceptualization, which may be used as a guide for future in-site architectural practice. Moreover, his resistance against the nationalist monumentality is another outcome of his weathering with the environment, from which we might get the second criterion of what is a ‘critical weathering’: a critical weathering should be guided towards or at least has the potential of responding to what has already happened and is still going on, for a better future. This criterion also agrees with Astrida and Rachel’s original idea because, rather than totally negating the political efforts to stop global warming, she was still providing a way for us as individuals to better intervene in climate change. These two criteria can be seen as a development of its origin, an alternative way of understanding the industrial impacts, and also might serve as a guidance for the praxis to be carried out in the author’s future architectural intervention in Yekaterinburg.

²⁴ Neimanis, Astrida, and Rachel Loewen Walker. 2014. "Weathering : Climate Change and the “Thick Time” of Transcorporeality". *Hypatia*. 29 (3): 558-575, p569.

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Illustration Credits

Figure 1: “The Water is red at the Central Russian Lake Karachay, dubbed the most polluted place on Earth”, <https://9gag.com/gag/aXjBQ3d>

Figure 2: Tarkovsky Andrei. *Stalker*, movie screenshot, 1979.

Figure 3: made by the author Gongbu Han with his teammates, Yichen Shih, Bas van Lenteren, Pedro Pantaleone and Sander van Rijn.

Figure 4: screenshot from Instagram, <https://www.instagram.com/explore/locations/2045455048846348/russia/berezovskiy-sverdlovskaya-oblast-russia/>

Figure 5: Екатеринбургский фотограф создал в Березовских Песках мир с чудовищами и тремя Иисусами, https://www.e1.ru/news/spool/news_id-69482977.html

Figure 6: Sooley Howard, photograph of Prospect Cottage, <https://www.artfund.org/blog/2020/02/20/exploring-derek-jarman-garden-prospect-cottage-jonny-brucedan-pearson-howard-sooley>.

Figure 7: made by the author, Gongbu Han.

Figure 8: two pages from Derek Jarman’s journal, <https://gardenmuseum.org.uk/jarmansgarden/derek-jarmans-sketchbooks/>.

Figure 9: “Why Derek Jarman’s garden must be saved”, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/feb/29/why-derek-jarmans-garden-must-be-saved-aly-fowler>